

Australian media furore over Canberra protest

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It is now five days since Prime Minister Julia Gillard was hustled away from about 100 Aboriginal-rights protesters in Canberra, yet the frenzy that has been whipped up over the incident shows no signs of abating. Sections of the media, together with the opposition Liberal-National coalition, have declared that the protest was a “riot” and the most serious security breach for an Australian prime minister since the 1970s.

The rhetoric stands in stark contrast with what actually happened on January 26. A small group of people protested outside a Canberra restaurant where Gillard and opposition leader Tony Abbott had gathered for an official Australia Day event. Demonstrators were clearly angry—they demanded that Abbott explain his earlier statement that it was time to “move on” from the Aboriginal tent embassy established 40 years ago, chanted slogans, and hit the restaurant’s glass exterior with their hands—but were not violent. An estimated 50 to 60 police were then called in, nearly matching the number of protesters, and a group of officers rushed Gillard and Abbott out a side door and into a waiting vehicle.

The only part of the episode that could have been even remotely associated with “violence”—aside from at least two police officers striking demonstrators—was a plastic water bottle thrown at the official car as it ferried the prime minister and opposition leader away from the restaurant. The Australian Federal Police (AFP) later issued a statement that there was “no evidence of a criminal act” and “as such, the AFP is not conducting an investigation.”

The opposition has nevertheless formally demanded an investigation, with shadow attorney-general George Brandis yesterday writing to the AFP chief to insist the police must pursue the incident “given the gravity of the

security breach.”

The opposition has seized on the involvement of one of Gillard’s media advisers, Tony Hodges. He resigned after admitting that on January 26 he had contacted Unions ACT secretary Kim Sattler, who was with people from the tent embassy at the time, advising her of Abbott’s remarks earlier that day about “moving on” and suggesting that Aboriginal representatives go to the restaurant. The apparent intention was to have the opposition leader confronted and heckled by tent embassy supporters. The AFP concluded that there was “no evidence to suggest anyone acted illegally in telling Aboriginal protesters where to find Tony Abbott on Australia Day.”

The *Daily Telegraph*’s January 28 front page headline reflected the hysterical media assessment, “PM’s Man Resigns Over Riot: Inside Job Sparks National Security Scare.” The federal opposition is also threatening to move a parliamentary motion of no confidence against the minority Labor government over the issue.

The Australia Day incident has been seized upon by the political and media establishment for its own reactionary ends. A barrage of press commentary has implied that any form of protest is potentially violent and thus illegitimate.

Right-wing Murdoch columnist Andrew Bolt raised the violent police assaults on the Occupy encampments last year as a model of how to respond to such demonstrations. “We’ve allowed a shambolic Aboriginal tent embassy to despoil public space in Canberra for 40 years,” he complained, “when we wouldn’t tolerate a (non-Aboriginal) Occupy Melbourne protest for 40 days.”

The *Australian*’s editorial yesterday insisted that the

Australia Day incident “should cause the wider political Left to reconsider their tactics.” The newspaper hailed former New South Wales Premier Bob Carr for denouncing the “bankruptcy of old Left culture—paint the placards, stoke the anger and abuse, confront the police, produce scuffles ... create a lovely day out for the local anarchists and Trots.” These “squalid tactics,” the *Australian* concluded, “demand a full investigation.”

This campaign takes place in the context of mounting social upheavals internationally, as the working class re-enters the political stage in opposition to the corporate elite’s demands for mass job cuts, far lower wages and living standards, and the destruction of publicly-provided social services and welfare measures. The Australian ruling class is deeply fearful that it too will soon confront the kind of resistance put up by workers and young people in Greece, Spain, France, other European countries, and the US in the Wisconsin and Occupy movements last year. Belying the official bromides about the Australian economy being immune from the global crisis, job losses are accelerating and social inequality increasing at the same time as an economic slump looms, triggered by a slowdown in China or another global credit crunch.

For decades, Australian governments seeking to erode democratic rights, undermine workers’ wages and workplace conditions and attack welfare recipients have first targeted the most oppressed section of the working class, the Aboriginal population. The official response to a non-violent demonstration involving a small number of people on January 26 therefore stands as a warning about the kind of repressive measures that ordinary people will inevitably confront in the next period. Any move by workers to defend their interests outside of the existing official political channels will be immediately denounced as “violent.”

The Labor government’s attorney general Nicola Roxon yesterday suggested that participating in parliamentary election campaigns was the only legitimate form of political activity. “I think this [the January 26 protest] was a very ugly part of now what will be Australia’s history,” she declared. “We know that in Australia the best way, if you’ve got political differences, is to argue them out at the ballot box. People have their opportunity to do that, but not to use violence.”

The media and political elite has further used the

Australia Day protest incident to argue that Aborigines have no legitimate reason to protest any more. Abbott’s remarks, that the tent embassy ought to “move on” because “a lot has changed” since the 1970s, have been widely welcomed. The *Australian Financial Review* has ran a series of stories, including one headlined “No shortage of openings for blacks,” promoting the opportunities supposedly available to indigenous workers in the mining industry.

The *Australian* yesterday published an op-ed by economist Henry Ergas arguing that Aborigines were in fact the beneficiaries of “special treatment.” Making a slanderous amalgam of the Australia Day protesters with the anti-Muslim rioters on Sydney’s Cronulla beach in 2005, Ergas claimed that the reason there were several arrests in Cronulla but none in Canberra was that “the tent embassy rioters were Aboriginal, or claimed to be; the Cronulla rioters were not.”

Aboriginal Australians are among the most oppressed group of people in the world. Indigenous life expectancy is about a decade less than for non-indigenous Australians. Aborigines continue to suffer high rates of preventable diseases, such as trachoma, which has been eliminated from nearly every part of the world outside sub-Saharan Africa. Aborigines make up 2 percent of the Australian population, but 25 percent of its prison population, and are incarcerated at a rate five times higher than black people in South Africa were before Apartheid was abolished.

The obvious implication behind the ruling elite’s conclusion that, despite this situation, Aborigines have nothing to protest about any more, is that no-one in Australia has any legitimate reason to object to austerity measures and deteriorating living standards.



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